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High mercury levels found in Idaho reservoir

Nevada gold mines located downwind of Salmon Falls Creek could be source

Researchers have detected levels of mercury in a southern Idaho reservoir 150 times higher than found in lakes in the northeast United States.

Salmon Falls Creek Reservoir south of Twin Falls lies downwind from four Nevada gold mines that emit into the air more mercury annually than 25 average coal-fired power plants. Until 2002, the mines released more than triple the mercury.

Idaho environmental regulators say they don't have conclusive proof the gold mines caused the mercury pollution in the popular fishing reservoir. But they haven't found other possible sources of mercury, which could cause neurological damage, especially in young children, even at low levels.

An Idaho National Laboratory scientist found this summer that mercury levels in the air rose 30 to 70 percent higher than normal levels when winds blew from the southwest, where the mines are located. This is the first time anyone has monitored the air or the reservoir for mercury.

"The mines are the only sources big enough to cause those peaks," said Michael Abbott, an INL atmospheric scientist.

Since 2002, Idaho Department of Health and Welfare officials have warned anglers at Salmon Falls Creek Reservoir to limit how much fish they eat after discovering the fish had high levels of mercury.

Monitoring in August and September detected mercury levels in the reservoir seven times higher than a creek known to be contaminated in Nevada, and 150 times the highest levels found in lakes in the northeast United States. The Idaho Statesman obtained the results from Idaho Department of Environmental Quality documents.

"Nobody's ever seen a hot spot like this before," said Mike DuBois, an air quality analyst at the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality.

Nevada state officials say the four mines, responsible for 98 percent of the mercury released there, have dramatically reduced their output — from more than 15,000 pounds annually in 2002 to 4,000 pounds in 2004. Nevada is turning the voluntary program that led to the cutbacks into new regulations that all mines in the state must meet, said Colleen Cripps, Nevada Department of Environmental Protection deputy administrator.

Idaho's Department of Environmental Quality is trying to determine where the mercury is coming from so it can clean up the reservoir and keep it clean. The mercury could present a health threat across a wider swath of Idaho if the pollution came from those mines, DuBois said. Mercury deposited from the air could be polluting other watersheds.

Nevada decided it would cost far too much and take too long to determine where mercury from the mines was going, Cripps said. The state knew who the major sources were because of reports filed by the mining companies themselves.

"Rather than focus on where the mercury is coming from, we would concentrate on reducing the mercury from where we know it is," Cripps said.

The four companies — Newmont Mining, Barrick Goldstrike, Placer Dome and Queenstake Resources — all have participated in the voluntary program. Miners don't expect the new state regulatory program to force major cutbacks.

"The focus is on state-of-the-art controls, and we have those, said John Mudge, Newmont Mining's director of environmental affairs. "Monitoring and record keeping ... those are the right things to do and not a huge burden on us."

Idaho DEQ's DuBois said it was too early to tell if the mine's recent cutbacks in mercury pollution are enough. Even if a clear link is made to the mines, more research will be needed to determine how the mercury makes it into Salmon Falls Creek Reservoir and perhaps other waterways in Idaho, DuBois said.

"We appreciate the reductions the state has obtained," Dubois said. "But we'd like to see even further reductions."

Abbott collected his air data in late July and early August. He was back out collecting data earlier this week.

"What's needed are longer term studies," Abbott said.